

## Effects of Volunteerism on Individuals and Communities

Aidan H. LeMay

Pathways Academy of Technology and Design

Volunteerism is an important part of our daily lives and can drastically affect the way our communities function. Volunteering, or Volunteerism, is the practice of volunteering ones time to perform a service without financial compensation. For my capstone project, I chose this topic because I have been a volunteer myself with multiple organizations consistently over the past seven years. People have been volunteering ever since 1736, when Benjamin Franklin created the first volunteer fire fighting department. (Elrod, 2013) one-hundred and forty-five years later, the still-standing American Red Cross was created by Clara Barton to assist in war casualty, but has since grown into an organization dedicated to disaster relief and emergency assistance.

(Elrod, 2013) In this paper, I will explore effects on the individuals, effects on the community, ways volunteer organizations can increase involvement, my personal experience, as well as how and why to get involved in volunteering.

Volunteering can have a positive impact on you as an individual, from health benefits to mental benefits. In general, “Volunteering and helping others can help you reduce stress, combat depression, keep you mentally stimulated, and provide a sense of purpose.” (Segal & Robinson, 2018) In order to get these benefits, you don’t even need to commit to a long-term organization! Giving back in small ways, like helping someone carry groceries to their car or holding the door for a stranger, can help improve your mood immediately. This is short term, however. By doing

larger or longer projects, you can help combat mental health problems like stress, anger, anxiety, and even depression due to the social aspect of working with a volunteer organization and the regular contact with other volunteers, creating a support system for you! (Segal & Robinson,

2018) Another great benefit of volunteering (that can be applied to the real world too!) is increased self-confidence. Betterment and involvement with the community provides a sense of accomplishment, giving you an increased sense of purpose and leading to a boost in confidence. For physical benefits, there are plenty! Most volunteering involves physical activity, such as Habitat for Humanity, where volunteers help to build houses for those who cannot afford them. “Studies have found that those who volunteer have a lower mortality rate than those who do not. Older volunteers tend to walk more, find it easier to cope with everyday tasks, are less likely to develop high blood pressure, and have better thinking skills. Volunteering can also lessen symptoms of chronic pain and reduce the risk of heart disease.” (Segal & Robinson, 2018)

For a volunteer based organization, attendance can be a problem. There are a number of ways to increase the attendance of your volunteers however! “Your organization relies on the dedicated efforts of volunteers. But sometimes, fewer volunteers show up to event day than expected.” says Addison Van Auken. So in order to attract a constant and reliable crowd, there are a few methods you can use! First, you should always make sure your event is easy to find. Put out flyers, send emails, and make sure your advertisements are visible. Most importantly, however, you must advertise far enough ahead of the event that attendees can make plans and are not told last minute, but close enough that they won’t forget about it in the passing time. Generally this sweet spot is between one and two weeks, but it can vary depending on the level

of preparation for the event. One of the easiest ways to advertise past, current, and future events is to utilize a public calendar on your organizations website, if you plan on doing multiple events. Publicize your website at your events with business cards, flyers, pamphlets, posters, or any other form of adverts to direct interested volunteers to your data and events. Your newest event should always be the first thing someone sees on your website, as well. Put it on the homepage, but don't forget to update it when the event passes. This will make it easier for prospective helpers to find information about the event, and will make it more likely for them to attend. When using social media, or other public address programs, "Link to the event page directly (rather than your homepage). [...] This way, volunteers are only a few clicks away from signing up!" (Auken, 2018) Once you've drawn them in, the next step is to get them committed by signing up to volunteer. This will make them more likely to attend, as they have committed in writing. The signup itself, however, should be short and simple. Unless you need specific information, limit your questions to something that can be completed in a few minutes. If you lose their attention during the signup, it will make them less likely to assist in future events. The best platform to do so is Google Forms, accessed at <https://www.docs.google.com/forms/>. This is a free program that will automatically track all signups and can send confirmation emails after signup. With the information collected through this or any other signup system, remember to send out reminder emails before the event to confirm that your attendants will be in attendance. At the minimum, your email should include Location Details, Day-Of-Contact Numbers, What They Should Bring, and a Schedule For The Day if applicable. "You may also want to attach brief yet insightful literature about your cause so that volunteers are engaged before they even arrive. Your organization's preparedness demonstrates *your* dedication to the cause, inspiring

commitment on behalf of volunteers.” (Auken, 2018) For more advertisement and participant opportunities, you can reach out to local businesses. “More and more companies are incorporating volunteerism programs into their business model. Reach out to local companies, especially those with employee volunteer requirements, for your next event. Employees can sign up as a team, increasing the number of participants and the likelihood that all members will show up on event day.” (Auken, 2018) Make sure you follow up with the business afterwards, and report the attendance and participation times to them for their records. As an added bonus, if the employees enjoyed your event, they may be willing to attend again outside of work, so make sure to broadcast your contact information! If the business will not send members, they may be willing to publicize your opportunity to their customers. It is helpful, at events, to have an “email list” signup sheet for those who would like more information. If you employ this tactic, make sure to send a follow-up within 48 hours of the event, so it is still fresh in the minds of the volunteers. Send them a thank-you, as well as contact information and links to social media, websites, and other resources to attract them to future events. Finally, don’t forget to recognize and thank your volunteers, whether it is with an announcement, an email, a phone call, or whatever else. They are donating their time, and they want to know they are valued.

Since I was young, volunteering has been a huge part of my life. One of my first repetitive volunteer projects was with the Lebanon Junior Soccer Club, and I started out with odd jobs like setting up fields and helping with tournament scoring. Later I found a semi-permanent job in their concessions stand. I would show up in the mornings and set up the stand and the food, then stay the day and sell. This was a great experience since it taught me time management,

food handling skills, money management, and most importantly, customer service and people skills. These were all real life skills that have benefited me in every sense, from school to life in general. From there in seventh grade, I heard about and joined the Lebanon Leo's Club, a division of the Lions Club, which is an organized non-profit for community service. When I started with the club, one of our first projects was the Willimantic Walk for Warmth, where the club raised money for WAIM, an organization that provides winter heating for those in need. Later that year, we helped to run the Lebanon country fair from the ground up, including cleaning the grounds, setting up tables and chairs, cleaning garbage during the fair and selling lemonade. I helped with this event for the next four years, and the sense of accomplishment that organizing and running an event brings. This past year, I became club secretary so I can give back to them, and try and make it even better than it already is. Around the same time I started with the Leo's, I joined the Channel 3 Kids Camp out of Andover. I had gone there when I was younger as a camper and had always enjoyed the camp. When I heard that at thirteen I could join as a Teen Leader, I jumped at the opportunity. While this was not a community service organization in itself, as I did have to pay to attend the program, we did do community service projects while we were there. One such example, and one of my favorite projects we did, was with the Holiday Light Fantasia in Hartford. About a month before, we went out to Goodwin Park in Hartford and worked with the coordinators to test and change over 5,000 light bulbs on the displays. Some other teens attended the event as volunteers, collecting money and directing traffic.

I know how volunteering has benefited me, but I wanted to know what others felt.

Therefore, I spoke with business professionals to inquire about what benefits they have received because of volunteering. Frank Gulluni, a member of the Pathways Industry Advisory Board, says he has been volunteering for twenty plus years with such organizations as churches, schools, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, and homeless men and women, the project that stood out most to him. When asked about how volunteering has helped him currently, he responded “It continues to be a motivation for my remaining active, attuned, and passionate about equal opportunities for all and providing gateways to success, health, and happiness.” He claims that his “Life would be lackluster, at the very least, and perhaps selfish and protective of what is mine.” if he didn’t participate in these activities presently. Another board member, Dayl Walker, has also been volunteering for twenty plus years, with organizations like Hartford Public Schools, Asylum Hill Congregational Church, and Farmington Public Schools. One project that stood out to him was the Green Apple Day Of Service, “A unique moment to join schools across the world in celebrating the central role that schools play in preparing the next generation of leaders in sustainability.” When asked how volunteering helped them when he was younger, he responded “It taught me that I could be useful and help someone else, even when I was a kid. It helped me appreciate the advantages I had and others did not.” Benefits today, additionally, “[have] connected me to a broader community of people who like me, believe in volunteering, but many of them are different from me in age, ethnicity, where they live, and economic circumstances. I have met great people I might not have otherwise.” “I have helped improve my community and that feels good.” Because of his participation, he says he is a “happier, more grateful person”. An anonymous board member reported that they have been volunteering for

less than five years with Meals on Wheels, Special Olympics, community support, and an advisory Board member for Pathways, with the Special Olympics being their favorite. When they were young, they say that volunteering “help[ed] me see the broader picture; how people are different but all could be special; a reminder that we are very fortunate and not everyone has access to what we do in life and the privileges of life”. Now, volunteering helps them to “Stay connected with the community; feeling an internal reward. reminder of life outside my immediate [circle]” If they did not participate in volunteer projects, they say that they would be “very closed minded and unaware of my world and surrounding”.

I also distributed a survey and collected responses from my peers on volunteerism, collecting 18 responses. In total, 44.4% of the respondents were in the 16-18 year age range, 33.3% 13-15, and 22.2% were 23+. 89.9% of the survey takers said that they have participated in a volunteer project in the past, with such organizations as the Lebanon Leos Club, Rebuild America (which builds and cleans housing for those who cannot do it themselves), 4-H, and the Connecticut Renaissance Faire. All of the responses, though, say that they would recommend volunteering, for such reasons as “it is a great experience and great for making friends and getting involved with organisations and your community,” “because it can help lots of people and it makes you feel good at the end of the day,” “you can give opportunities to other people by raising money/supplies, you can also build skills and relationships with the people you work with, and have fun at the same time,” says another.

There are plenty of ways for you to get involved with an organization near you. In most towns in the United States, there are Lions (and subsequently Leo's) clubs, organizations that focus on community betterment, involvement, and service. To find an organization near you, visit [www.lionsclubs.org](http://www.lionsclubs.org) for more information. For information on the Leo's clubs, see <https://www.lionsclubs.org/en/start-our-approach/club-locator> , or <https://lionsclubs.org/en/resources-for-members/resource-center/start-a-leo-club> if you want to start a club.



## References

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